The gothic as a theme per se, is growing faster and faster in popularity. Even today, novels and films that are overrun by the gothic horror make their way to the top of the bestseller scale. The gothic comes to the modern reader or viewer, packaged in myriad forms. Horror and the thrill of chill have bagged the pride of place for countless films all over the world. Besides films, there are those horrific tales of ghostly houses, spirits of the dead in horror novels by writers like Stephen King, Lucius Shepard, Russell Kirk, Algernon Blackwood, David Case, John Metcalfe, Oliver Onions, A.C. Benson - the list could be endless. The gothic there harks back to the raw evocation of the unadulterated terror and fear that was used in novels like Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Lewis's *The Monk*. David Case's *Fengriffen*, for instance, rakes up horror in all its starkness:

Suddenly, from behind the tombstone, a face rushed up at me! A hideous face with hollow eyes, a red smear running upwards from the corner of the mouth to the cheekbone, a smear the colour of blood, as though he had been tearing into raw flesh... I tried to rip my eyes from this manifestation
of evil, but they were held rigid in their sockets; wished to escape into unconsciousness, but could not faint, wished to scream, but found my vocal chords bound in a knot. (195)

The story goes on to culminate in an apogee of terror as the gothic here turns ghastlier by the minute. Again, in *The Haunted*, another of the gothic kind by Lord Lytton, the author schematically builds up an ambience of intolerable fear as he keeps piling horror upon horror:

It was Darkness shaping itself forth from the air in very undefined outline. ...While I gazed a feeling of intense cold seized me. An iceberg before me could not have chilled me; nor could the cold of an iceberg have been more purely physical. I feel convinced that it was not the cold caused by fear. As I continued to gaze, I thought — that I distinguished two eyes looking down on me from the height. (23).

These lines are very close to the vivid horror brought forth in the ur-gothic fiction of Walpole or 'Monk' Lewis or Maturin. In fact, the lines quoted above from Lord Lytton and David Case, greatly resemble some of the lines from Maturin's classic gothic novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer*: 158
Who is among us? who? I cannot utter a blessing while he is here. I cannot feel one. Where he treads, the earth is parched! – where he breathes, the air is fire! – Where he feeds, the food is poison! Where he turns, his glance is lightning! – Who is among us? – Who?

The authors, in both the cases concentrate on the creation of a spine-chilling ambience that banks on the rather clichéd paraphernalia of intangible presences, extrasensory feelings and an ominous negation of divinity. The modern gothic authors like Stephen King, David Case, John Metcalfe, Lord Lytton or A.C. Benson aim at the sheer pleasure of letting fear creep up the spine in their novels. Their novels do not intend to dig underneath for some subcutaneous exploration below the surface level of horror. Theirs is horror absolutely for the sake of horror.

Yet, there are some more modern authors who go a bit further in subtlety and design from a crude display of ghosts as they consider this kind of fiction-writing to be too puerile for literary appreciation. Edgar Allan Poe, Sheridan Le Fanu believe that horror, if it has to come, has to arise from sources that are more tangible, plausible and serious than lonely spooks wailing dolefully down empty passages. Hence, horror does come in their fiction, but it arises from the mangled depth of a demented mind or the dark womb of the mind that is hiding scores of skeletons in its closet. Thus, in Sheridan Le Fanu’s famous work, Madam Crowl’s Ghost one comes across the gruesome tale of old Dame Arabella Crowl of Applewale House, told in the awed and terrified first-person-narrative by a thirteen year old servant girl. The very
... her nose was crooked and thin, and half the whites o' her eyes was open. She used to stand ... her wrinkled little hands was stretched down by her sides and such long nails all cut into points ... And in an instant she opens her eyes ... facin' me, ogglin' in my face wi' her two great, glassy eyes, and a wicked simper wi' her old wrinkled lips, and long fause teeth. Well, a corpse is a natural thing; but this was the dreadfullest sight I ever sid. She had her fingers straight out pointing at me ... Says she: 'Ye little limb! What for did ye say I killed the boy?' and she came clatterin' after, like a thing on wires, with her fingers pointing to my throat, and she making all the time a sound with her tongue like zizz – zizz – zizz. (9)

It later turns out that this ninety-four-year old sleepwalking old creature is a pitiable wretch - a miserable prey to a very guilty conscience. She is later discovered to be the murderer of her nine-year-old stepson whom she had walled up alive ages ago. Like the distraught Lady Macbeth, she glides about dolefully, her words betraying her guilt: "what for did ye say I killed the boy?" The horror that surfaces with her dishevelled, witch-like figure and later with the discovery of the heap of bones from
within the walls, goes beyond the surface level and prods the subliminal level of the mind. Thus, these authors do make use of horror but their focal point becomes the world of the mind, the unfathomable depths of the human brain.

In America, a group of young writers believe in taking horror to the more precarious field of the exploration of human values, relationships and feelings through their novels which can very well be dubbed the 'New American Gothic'. They harness the gothic mode in their fiction to explore and expose the dark, unknown areas of desires, frustration, dreams, ambitions and the desperation of seeing them thwarted. The two world wars with their disastrous consequences, the shattering of the American Dream — all of these events remoulded the collective consciousness of man as they took every single American in the inexorable stride of history. Minds changed, needs changed, desires changed, lifestyles changed and with them changed relationships. The term 'relationship' underwent a metamorphosis from simplicity to complexity. Distrust, treachery, humiliation and hatred crept into relationships that earlier had been simple relationships of trust, loyalty, elation and love. Even the mother and child bond — a bond that is usually and conventionally considered to be the closest, the most unconditionally loving relationship — takes a new turn with mothers developing other interests like career and fashion. Mothers in the modern era are more ambitious about life. They prod and goad children into conforming to a lifestyle that demands the pinnacle of everything—wealth, fame, education and career. Children, bowed down under the pressure, often find it difficult to adjust to the fast pace of life. They find it hard to live up to their ambitious parents'
tagged Richard, and 'Richard' must have evoked in her mind mechanical thoughts of guilt and responsibility and love. She loved me when she was happy. She loved me when she happened to notice me. She loved me if I was good, if Father was good, if she'd been invited out both nights of a weekend, if the world was going well, if the humidity was low and the barometer agreeable! Whereas I loved her always when she was a bitch or when she was saintly, lovely or ugly, with short shining hair or long greasy hair. I loved her and what good did it do either of us? [110]

One stares aghast at the desperate bitterness welling up in the heart of the child of a modern day mother – a child who craves for the love – the conventional, universally acclaimed 'unconditional love of a mother, who shall have the power to set aside all her own troubles, frustrations and desires to shower her child with love – always. Yet, reality wills otherwise. Often, a modern mother who has to juggle with the roles of a wife, homemaker, mother, and an individual with personal wishes and ambitions, finds it difficult to balance everything to a tee, thereby, often landing up in a mess about how to reconcile these roles in life. This results in breakage of homes, hearts and relationships. The child-parent relationship gets soured. The child who instinctively turns to the mother for support, safety and love, feels lost and forlorn when the mother fails to cater to his needs. This leads to a rift in ties that can
culminate in such formidable extents as shown in Joyce's *Expensive People*. The
gothic sets in as Joyce's Richard Everett — a pitiable prey of psychic turmoil —
reaches a schizophrenic state of mind where he finds a good deal of difficulty in
telling reality from fantasy. He ends up confessing to the murder of his mother. Yet,
as it turns out later, he may not have committed the murder at all. Everett is a victim
of paranoia generated by the American Dream and the wealth, over-consumption
and complacency that it left in its wake. Everett disintegrated and devastated.
The parent-child relationship with the rot setting in, is explored in Ruth Rendell's *A
Tree of Hands* [1984], too. Rendell, famous for her novels of psychological suspense
like *To Fear a Painted Devil* [1965], *The Lake of Darkness* [1980] and *Live Flesh*
[1986], plumbs the unnerving disintegration of minds with graphic clarity, thereby
stoking up the gothic in the very novel sense of the term. In *The Tree of Hands*, the
first person narrator, an authoress herself, feels stifled with the asphyxiating impasse
that her relationship with her mother has reached. Able to make it on her own now,
the protagonist, Benet, is stranded in a crisis where she has her mother— Mopsa — as
she calls her, staying in with her for a few days. Those few days, and the sudden,
tragic death of her own three-year-old son, give her the occasion and mental quiet to
ponder over the days gone by. Retrospection gives her a clear overview of her
relationship with her mother. She feels it down in her bones that her mother is
paranoid, detached, as she finds their views and ways of life diverging widely. She
constantly has to remind herself not to despise her mother:
She [Benet] was filled with an intense dislike of Mopsa, something that verged on hatred. When her mother was rational like this though exhibiting all the signs of solipsism -- indifference to others' wishes, deep selfishness -- the feeling that all her madness was an act put on to gain attention, was inescapable. And if it were an act, wasn't that in itself a sign of madness, that anyone would take an act so far? I must not hate my mother...[26].

So much is Benet's aversion to her mother Margaret, ironically called 'Mopsa' by her, that the line 'I must not hate my mother' almost becomes a refrain in the book - so often is it reiterated. The gothic comes in as one realizes the horror of a so-called sublime relationship between a mother and a child being entangled in the mire of hatred, bitterness, misunderstanding and disdain. Extreme mental stress leads to the disintegration of the mind. Thus, paranoia, as a very important aspect of the gothic, surfaces in most of the modern gothic novels. John Hawkes's The Cannibal shows the abnormal, ghastly, demented behavior of a Duke who feeds himself on the bodies of children — thus symbolizing the ghastly ambience of the post-war world. The book shows how war had left back a trail of psychotic, obsessive maniacal minds by imaging the Duke's cannibalism in grotesque detail:

He would have preferred to have a light and a glass-topped
table to follow the whole thing out on a chart knowing which muscles to cut and which to tie ... The very fact that it was not a deer or a possum made the thing hard to skin. The fact that it was not a rabbit made it hard to dissect. Its infernal humanness carried over even into death and made the carcass just as difficult as the human being had itself been ...(206-7).

This objective correlative for a tortuous, strained and predatory relationship between the ruler and the ruled speaks volumes about human existence in an unrestful society. Numerous other modern gothic authors harp upon the same issue. Mervyn Peake, for instance in the trilogy, *Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast* and *Titus Alone* sketches out the big castle of Gormenghast as the symbolic representation of a world of failed human aspirations and countless shackles of helplessness – a world terrifying, because its hidden dangers are unknown and unpredictable. All this is so very modern. But, once set against the work of the Brontes, it all seems quite jaded for the three rebellious, thoughtful girls, brought up amidst the reposeful silence of the moors of Haworth, had already shown the world the workings of the human psyche under terrible stress. Like Peake's Gormenghast, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte's *Thornfield* and Anne's *Wildfell Hall*, too were objective epitomisations of mental states of extreme unease. The torment of children that shocks modern readers in Hawke's *The Cannibal*, did silently make its mark ages

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ago in Emily's *Wuthering Heights*. The complexity of relationship that baffles readers in modern creations like Rendell’s *A Tree of Hands* or Oates’s *Expensive People* was there, explored in subtle detail in almost all of the Bronte novels. The paranoia that surfaces in Poe in Le Fanu created the unheimlich in Emily's *Wuthering Heights* or Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*.

The Bronte sisters wrote their novels, lost amidst the wilderness of the desolate moors around Haworth, with a martinet of a father to keep strict surveillance on them. They had no mother to share their feelings with -- only a stickler of an aunt to discipline them. Maybe this void in their lives proved a boon in disguise to them. For it was this urge to give vent to the pent up emotions and feelings within, that turned these girls to writing. Branwell, their brother did start out well enough with his early contributions to the saga of Angria, the fantasyland somewhere in West Africa, but a bohemian lifestyle and addiction dulled his talents into naught. The girls satisfied their penchant for literature through their juvenile attempts at the tales of Angria and Gondal. They read whatever journals they could lay hands on, the most read being the *The Blackwood’s Magazine*. Incidentally, most of them often carried tales of the supernatural, thereby unconsciously shaping their mental inclinations. Naturally, it was no wonder that the literary output of these girls would be heavily laced with gothic touches. As marked in the earlier chapters, this gothic facade, proved to be a perfect objective correlative for voicing the thoughts — often seriously rebellious — that reared their heads in the thoughtful minds of the Brontes. This fusion of the gothic and the normal, terror and emotion, sensationalism and realism is what set
the Bronte books in a class of their own. Louisa May Alcott (1832-1888) too wrote in about the same time as the Brontes. She wrote about the travails of a lone woman battling through life with four adolescent girls. She wrote about good wives with their too-good-to-be-true households. She too, like the Brontes, wrote women-oriented novels. But no trace of the gothic was there. George Eliot (1819-1880) wrote somewhat autobiographically of the emotions and ambitions of the feminine mind through the life story of the ever-memorable Maggie Tulliver in *her Mill on the Floss* (1860). But there was no gothic there either. It was in the Brontes that this strange trend surfaced. As shown in the earlier chapters, the Brontes wrote stories that offered to rewrite the gothic — not in terms of ghosts and haunted castles so much as in terms of weird gloom, depressing angst and quaking terror. *Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre*, *Villette, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* exemplify this perfectly.

Yet, once we get over the primary impression of gothic ambience, we realise the deeper level of significance. *Wuthering Heights* explores the unknown vaults of a mind gone derange from frustrated ambitions, the dichotomy in social values, the powerlessness of women as a contrast to the freedom of power in men. *Jane Eyre* holds up the nuances of a mind oppressed by passions and feelings which failed to get an outlet in an insular society. The subtle shades of a mind living under constant effort to reach goals higher than was set for it, and a continual fear of losing what it has dearly achieved, surface through surrealistic dreams and visions. Yet, Charlotte brings it all out under the subterfuge of relating the story of Jane Eyre which happens to have sensational episodes like a mad woman locked up in an attic. *The Tenant of
Wildfell Hall with its imposing venue and mysterious inhabitant, does put forth some
gothic ambience. But deep underneath, runs a serious observation on a marriage
that was a tragedy of mismatch. Being camouflaged under the overt impression of a
gothic story, it became easier for Anne Bronte to voice ideas about marriage that
would sound alarmingly precocious in a conservative Victorian society.

Yet it is a pity that all this needs to be pointed out so bluntly. One wonders whether
the Brontes did get their due share of acclaim in the literati for ages. People talk of
Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Maturin, Lewis when they talk of the gothic. But
why they overlook the aesthetic singularity and authenticity of the gothic as employed
by the Brontes is a mystery. Victor Sage even goes to the extent of saying that
'Literary history marks a conventional ending for the cult of the Gothick at about
1820'. What then about the Brontes? What about their use of the age-old motif in a
uniquely serious purpose? Whenever the topic of the gothic is broached upon,
Walpole, Radcliffe or Beckford find pride of place. Beckford had already become the
grist for lots of talk when he had a campaign directed against him by the Lord
Chancellor Loughborough for alleged homosexual relations to the latter's nephew
William Courtenay. A well known political person, Beckford directed his novels and
other writings often towards an explicit dislike for a regime that had suspended the
Habeas Corpus Act. Like Beckford, Lewis (another Whig member of the Parliament)
stirred up a furore with his novel The Monk, where he puts forth a number of anti-
Catholic suggestions. But even through persecution, these men drew the spotlights
on themselves. They received publicity that honed the public interest in them.
that banned the public interest in them, that had already been mothered by their fame as gothic writers. But in contrast, the Brontes had to struggle a good deal before they saw success with their works. One wonders whether it was their cloistered life with little outlet to the world outside that made recognition so late in coming. Or was it a patriarchal society that turned up its nose at the overtly feministic outlook in even the most gothic of the Bronte tales?


